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THE DECLINE OF THE ENGLISH APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

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As was shown in a former article, the English apprenticeship system under the control of the gilds was something of a success, this success being largely due to the personal relationship existing between master and apprentice, and to the effective supervision of their relationship by the craft gild. Eminently suited as the institution was to the conditions of the Middle Ages, however, it was not equally well suited to all times and all conditions. In the present article, an attempt will be made to show: first, that the custom of apprenticeship was continued by the English government after the decline of the gild system; secondly, that the institution lost its strength as a result of the changed social and economic conditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and thirdly, that a revival of the apprenticeship system would prove inadequate as a solution of the present problem of industrial education.

Neither bombastic by-laws nor prosecution for offenses against them could save the gilds from decline. In some of the old corporate towns they may have retained even in the eighteenth century a considerable hold upon the local market,¹ but they had little or no control in the newer industrial centers of England, such as Manchester and Birmingham, where manufactures developed rapidly upon a capitalistic basis. In a word, the gilds, retaining the form and spirit of the Middle Ages, could not adjust themselves to the conditions of the modern era.

Though the gilds declined, apprenticeship persisted, achieving a new importance in Elizabeth's reign (1558-1603) as a part of

¹ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (Cannan, ed.), I, 131: "If you would have your work tolerably executed, it must be done in the suburbs, where the workmen having no exclusive privilege, have nothing but their characters to depend upon, and you must then smuggle it into the town as well as you can."

British economic policy. Two laws were passed which greatly affected the history of the institution. The first of these, the Statute of Artificers or Apprentices,¹ forbade any one henceforth to exercise any craft then existing in England, unless he had previously served at least seven years thereto as an apprentice. This law made more general the seven-years' requirement, previously dependent chiefly on local custom and gild regulation.²

The second law, an act of 1601,³ attempted to deal with the curse of pauperism. Towns and villages had fallen into decay, agriculture was giving way to sheep-farming, and the land was full of "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars." To prevent the rising generation from growing up in idleness the law of 1601 provided that the parish authorities might bind out beggar children as apprentices "where they shall see convenient."⁴ By means of laws such as these two, Parliament hoped to bring about greater stability in industrial life and thus to increase the strength and prosperity of the realm of England.

Thus the institution of apprenticeship was vitally affected by the two acts of the fifth and forty-third years of Queen Elizabeth. In the first place, the number of apprentices must have been very greatly increased. In the second place, these apprentices were drawn very largely from a lower stratum of society than formerly. And finally, as has been already indicated, the institution of apprenticeship was continued under new auspices at a time when the gilds were dying out.

To the parish apprenticeship system the attempt was made to extend the idea of the personal relationship between master and apprentice. The master was still expected to perform the duties of a parent toward the indentured child, and sometimes to provide him with the elements of education. Many of the American colonies passed laws insisting upon the instruction, especially the religious instruction, of apprentices. Thus the Connecticut Code of 1650 made it incumbent upon masters to catechize their children

¹ 5 Eliz. c. 4.

² The law was by no means a dead letter, though enforced irregularly. From a study of local records and law reports I find this to be so.

³ 43 Eliz. c. 2.

⁴ Sec. 5.

and servants once a week at least, "in the grounds and principles of religion," and to teach "by themselves or others their children and apprentices so much learning as may enable them perfectly to read the English tongue and knowledge of the capital laws."¹ In England no general law to compel masters to provide apprentices with this sort of instruction is to be found before the Act of 1802, of which mention will be made later; but individual masters sometimes agreed to see to the schooling of children bound out to them.²

The personal relationship, however, was being gradually undermined. The very nature of the parish apprenticeship system was such as to create a gulf between the master and his fledgling workmen. The children were from the lowest grade of society, were apt to be idle and immoral, and therefore likely to receive little consideration from their masters. A law of the latter seventeenth century widened the gulf by compelling persons, willing or unwilling, to receive parish children as apprentices at the pleasure of the authorities.³ Not rarely the apprentice thus forced upon a parish resident must have become an object of distaste to him.

The growth of capitalism also weakened the personal relationship between master and apprentice.

The typical craftsman of the Middle Ages was a man of small means, keeping but one or two apprentices; besides, the number was limited by gild ordinance. But from the fifteenth century on, there was an increasing tendency on the part of masters possessed of capital to disregard these rules. The laws of the Framework Knitters' Company, for example, forbade more than three apprentices to be taken to one journeyman: in Queen Anne's reign (1701 to 1714) some masters took ten or more to one journeyman,⁴ while later in the century a certain master "always had a staff of twenty-

¹ Clews, *Colonial Educational Legislation*, p. 59; see also Hening, *The Statutes at Large* (Virginia), 4 Anne c. 33; *Records of the Massachusetts Colony*, II, 6; Clews, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

² Bateson, *Leicester Records*, III, 197; Markham and Cox, *Records of Northampton*, II, 323.

³ 8 and 9 Will. III, c. 30. In one instance a girl was bound out to a clergyman, who was compelled "to teach her the art and mystery of husbandry" (Cox, *Derbyshire* I, 243).

⁴ W. Felkin, *History of the Machine Wrought Hosiery and Lace Manufactures*, p. 23.

five apprentices, more or less, and never employed a journeyman for more than thirty years."¹

The impossibility of keeping up the old family relationship under these conditions, the impossibility of giving apprentices adequate trade instruction, is obvious. The capitalist manufacturer would not stand *in loco parentis* to twenty or thirty ragged children nor would he take pains to teach them their trade properly. Even had he had the time and inclination to instruct them, it was becoming less and less to his economic interest to do so. For as the number of apprentices and other operatives increased, the tendency was to confine workmen to one or two processes of manufacture, in which they might become especially skilled.² Such a practice was, of course, subversive of any adequate industrial education.

In general, then, the manufacturer failed to care properly for the social and economic interests of his apprentice; his predecessor, the mediaeval gild master, under the supervision of the craft gild, had equipped the youth for life in a far better way.

These conditions, affecting so seriously the lives of apprentices, were aggravated by the growth of cut-throat competition and the increased use of labor-saving machinery. For their own advantage, capitalists "used all their power to oppress the laborers, and drove down wages to starvation point,"³ and after Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* appeared (1776) manufacturers used his *laissez-faire* theory to justify intellectually and morally their policy of unrestricted competition and control of industry.⁴ Thus capital and competition brought antagonism between employer and employee, between master and apprentice.

The epoch of invention, beginning about the middle of the eighteenth century, while it marks an enormous advance in economic progress, marks also the last stage in the history of the old apprenticeship system. The invention of labor-saving machinery increased the tendency to the division of labor,⁵ and thus hindered

¹ W. Felkin, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

² Cunningham, *Growth of English Industry and Commerce*, "Modern Times," Part II, p. 615.

³ Toynbee, *Industrial Revolution*, p. 66.

⁴ Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 49.

⁵ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, "Modern Times," Part II, p. 615; Baines, *History of Cotton Manufacture*, p. 184.

workers from attaining a thorough knowledge of their trades. Sometimes it rendered possible the substitution of unskilled labor, thus making a long apprenticeship unnecessary from the economic viewpoint of the master. In many instances children were now able to attend machines and carry on work which had formerly required the attention of adults.¹ Thus was the institution of apprenticeship metamorphosed into the practice of child labor; the children might retain the name of apprentices, but they were practically wretched, unintelligent little factory hands.

The decay of the apprenticeship system is also due, in part, to the lack of an adequate supervision, to take the place of that once supplied by the gilds. There was no gild court to see that the master treated his apprentice properly, no adequate system of examinations to test the results of the apprentice's work and the master's teaching. In a word, there was no institution vitally interested, as the gild had been, in the welfare of the apprentice and in his relation to his master.

Legislation did, indeed, attempt to set up a system of supervision for parish apprentices. The parish authorities were supposed to see that master and apprentice did their duty to each other,² but their oversight was inefficient.³ A writer of 1732 says: "Parish officers to save expense, are apt to ruin children by putting them out as early as they can, to any sorry masters that will take them, without any concern for their education or welfare."⁴ Apprentices might be neglected, ill-treated or starved by their masters; they might lead lives of idleness or wickedness, with little or no interference from the authorities.⁵

To the neglect of the parish officers, then, and to their failure to exercise a proper supervision over the relationship of master and

¹ Baines, *History of Cotton Manufacture*, p. 239.

² 43 Eliz. c. 2; 8 and 9 Will. III, c. 30; 17 Geo. II, c. 3; etc.

³ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, "Modern Times," Part II, p. 629; Acts of Parliament, 7, Geo. III, c. 39, and 33 Geo. III, c. 55.

⁴ Hutchins and Harrison, *History of Factory Legislation*, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 14; Felkin, *op. cit.*, p. 79. "Sir Samuel Romilly says in his *Diary* (II, 374) that he has known cases where the 'apprentices were murdered by their masters in order to get fresh premiums with new apprentices'" (Hutchins and Harrison, p. 14).

apprentice, may be in part attributed the wretched and uninstructed condition of the children in the factories.

In 1802 the government roused itself to a more vigorous effort to remedy the evils clustering around the apprenticeship system. An act was passed for the "Preservation of the Health and Morals of Apprentices and others, employed in Cotton and other Mills, and Cotton and other factories."¹ This law ordered every master or mistress of a mill to supply every apprentice "with suitable linen, stockings, hats, and shoes," one complete new suit to be delivered once a year. No apprentice was to be compelled to work more than twelve hours in any one day, nor to work between nine at night and six in the morning. It was also enacted that every apprentice should be instructed during a part of every working-day in reading, writing, and arithmetic by some person provided and paid by the master and mistress. Furthermore, religious instruction was to be given and masters were to see to it that their apprentices attended divine service regularly. It is clear that this act is an attempt to make the master responsible, as of yore, for the moral and physical welfare of his young charges. But manufacturers could not be made to accept this responsibility; this and later "factory acts" failed in their purpose.² Shortly afterward the apprenticeship clauses of the Act of Fifth Elizabeth were abolished, first for those engaged in the woolen manufactures,³ and in 1814 for all trades.⁴ The day of apprenticeship as a system was past. Social progress had failed to keep pace with economic advance and the twentieth century is therefore attempting to solve problems created by the seventeenth and eighteenth.

It is evident from all this that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the English apprenticeship system was by no means a success. Neither the social nor the economic interests of the apprentice were cared for properly. In mediaeval times the master had received the boy into the family life, looked after his moral and religious, as well as his physical, welfare, and in teaching him his craft, had given him the advantage of individual instruction. If the master were negligent in his teaching, if he failed in his social

¹ 42 Geo. III, c. 73.

³ 49 Geo. III, c. 109.

² Hutchins and Harrison, p. 17.

⁴ 54 Geo. III, c. 96.

duty toward the lad, he was called to account by the authority of the gild. In general the mediaeval apprentice was not ill-prepared to take his place in society. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries manufacturers were outgrowing the gild system and paid less and less attention to restrictions made upon the number of apprentices by either the gild or the government. With a large number of apprentices the manufacturer could not sustain the same personal relations as with one or two. Craft instruction and moral training suffered accordingly. Furthermore, with the employment of large numbers of apprentices came the temptation to the master to perfect each apprentice in one or two processes instead of teaching him the whole trade. Finally, as the use of machinery increased, the need for skilled labor decreased and not infrequently the apprentice became merely the unskilled operative of a machine. On the other hand, the manufacturer needed not only a wide knowledge of his craft, but a considerable amount of capital as well to succeed in his business. Thus it came about that the apprentice in many branches of manufacture could not look forward to becoming a master as a matter of course, but was forced to remain a factory operative all his life.

The social gulf between the master and his apprentices, which was in many cases created by the rise of capital, was further increased by the parish apprenticeship system. Apprentices drawn from the lowest portion of society could not expect always to be received on terms of equality into their masters' houses, especially where the masters were forced by the authorities to receive these apprentices. There was indeed an attempt to preserve the old personal relation between master and apprentice, but there was no institution like the gild to see that the right relation was preserved. In general the attempt was not a success and the condition of the parish apprentices was frequently wretched indeed. This is true not merely of the factories, but of the handicrafts as well. In its latter days, then, the apprenticeship system was a failure.

Would it be a success if it were generally revived at the present time? There can be no doubt that many of the factors instrumental in breaking down the old apprenticeship system are dominant in industrial life today. Capital is a prime moving force, the

factory system is firmly fixed, the captain of industry deals with large numbers of operatives, not with a few journeymen and apprentices. The social gulf between employer and employee is as great as ever, the economic difficulties preventing the operative from rising into the manufacturing class are greater than ever. More than this, there is a distinct antagonism between the employing and the employed classes. These conditions would make it impossible to bring back the old personal relationship and identity of economic interest between master and apprentice, which formed so important an element of the success of the old system.¹ If the apprenticeship system is to be revived, then, it must be revived in some form totally different from that of the Middle Ages.

It must be remembered that the problem of industrial education is both economic and social in character. It means not merely that the youth should be trained to become an efficient workman with a skilled knowledge of all branches of his trade, but it means also that there should be implanted in him high ideals in regard to his work, that his growing moral nature should be developed at a period in his life when temptation is most likely to assail him; in a word, that he should be made an efficient and high-minded member of society.

If the problem were merely the economic one of supplying manufacturers with skilled labor, it might possibly be left to the employing class for solution. Just now there is a growing demand among employers for skilled labor; consequently enterprising manufacturing concerns are paying more attention to the apprenticeship system, and are establishing apprentice schools which have met with some success.² There can be no doubt, too, that certain specialized branches of manufacture can never be well taught save in the concerns carrying on these industries.³ On the other hand, the demand of employers for skilled labor affects but a small proportion of the industrial classes, for employers need thoroughly trained mechanics for only a comparatively small number of posi-

¹ This would not apply to those trades which still remain largely on a handicraft basis, such as those of barber and custom tailor.

² Carroll D. Wright, *The Apprenticeship System in Its Relation to Industrial Education*.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 35, 41.

tions, while the question of industrial education concerns some 90 per cent of the population. Already the advisability of giving apprentices a thorough knowledge of the principles underlying its manufacture is being questioned by at least one concern which has established a school for apprentices. Principal J. D. Burks, of the Teachers Training School, Albany, N.Y., writes:

A few weeks ago I was inspecting one of the largest manufacturing establishments in New York state, which had recently organized a school for apprentices, provided it with a thoroughly modern equipment, and placed in charge a well-educated man of high ideals and practical ability. Here, I thought, I had found an enterprise that might have something to teach the schools concerning their effort to meet concrete social needs. The master-mechanic, to whose initiative this school was due, told me, however, that he had serious doubt as to the practical value of his apprentice school. He thought he would direct the teacher to use the machines for demonstration purposes only, as the boys spent too much time "figuring out how to get a piece of work set up, and how to get the thing done." "These boys," he said, "will work all their lives for our company, and we want them to do things our way. We don't want the boys to draw; we want them to read drawings. We don't want them to figure; we want them to read figures. We don't want them to boss. We want them to be bossed." And he might have added, "We don't want them to think, but to become automatic machines."¹

It is evident, then, that manufacturing establishments do not always feel it to their economic advantage to give apprentices a broad knowledge of the various processes of their branches of manufacture.²

It is hardly probable that the manufacturer will fully perceive the social significance of the movement for industrial education and

¹ Proceedings of the National Education Association, 1909, p. 293.

² "President Charles S. Howe, of the Case School of Applied Science, Cleveland, Ohio, in 1907, sent a letter to 400 manufacturers in the state of Ohio, making certain inquiries relative to the apprenticeship system, and received replies from 124, including nearly all the large concerns among the 400 addressed. Of the 124 who answered, 44 had no apprenticeship system, and were not especially interested in it; 24 had no system, but were interested. The superintendents of these 24 stated that they had no apprenticeship system because they had very few men employed, but they hoped as soon as their facilities increased, and their work expanded, to establish such a system at least to a limited extent. Fifty-six companies answered that they had apprenticeship systems more or less complete, but most of them gave the apprentices nothing more than was absolutely necessary to enable them to do their work in the particular trades engaged in with fair success."—Wright, *The Apprenticeship System*, etc., pp. 18, 19.

co-operate with it. He has not done a great deal thus far to remove the deadening influences of factory labor, save where reforms have been forced on him from without. He views his employees from the economic rather than from the social point of view, and would be likely to consider the moral, aesthetic, and social training of the apprentices as more or less of a waste of time. Individual manufacturers of a philanthropic nature may do something to give their youngest workmen the right sort of industrial instruction from the social as well as the economic point of view, but not manufacturers as a class.

It is chiefly to the public school that we must look for a solution of the problem of industrial education. The public school can furnish, in greater degree than any other agency, those elements upon which the success of the mediaeval institution of apprenticeship so largely depended—an adequate system of supervision and the right personal relationship between teacher and taught. The public school has already developed a well-organized system of administration and supervision which it can easily extend to include industrial education. The thought of economic gain will not blind the eyes of the teacher to the social needs of his pupils, as it blinded the eyes of the master to the needs of the apprentice, and as it sometimes blinds the eyes of the manufacturer to the needs of the employee. More and more the public school is insisting that there be the right personal relationship between teacher and taught, for the ultimate aim of education must always be the welfare of the pupil. I doubt if there is any higher service that a teacher can perform for society than that of guiding boys in their formative years to high ideals of industrial work and of life.